



# Mi manca la voce: How Balzac Talks Music - Or How Music Takes Place - in Massimilla Doni

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*Mi manca la voce*

How Balzac Talks Music—or How Music Takes Place—in *Massimilla Doni*

John T. Hamilton

In a letter to Madame Hanska, dated November 2, 1833, Balzac barely conceals envy with skepticism when he writes: “I have read all of Hoffmann, he is below his reputation; there is something there, but nothing great; *il parle bien musique*.”<sup>1</sup> The tone of the professional writer comes across fairly clearly. One craftsman judges the workmanship of another; popular opinion needs to be checked; yet, all the same, credit must be given where credit is due: E.T.A. Hoffmann “*parle bien musique*.” Balzac does not say that Hoffmann talks *about* music (“*il parle de musique*”); rather “*il parle musique*”—“he talks music,” like others “talk politics” or “talk shop.” However much Balzac tries to discount the accomplishments of this famous German author of *Fantasy* and *Night Pieces*—a weak dismissal that cannot hide what we know to be a deep admiration and fondness—Balzac must at least acknowledge Hoffmann’s capacity to deal successfully with musical topics and themes without talking simply about them, to capture something that may be called the essence of music, to depict the life of composers, performers, and listeners with psychological acuity, even to arrange texts that are deeply orchestrated, that is, in a manner that does not treat music merely as a metaphor. In regard to these criteria, Hoffmann’s resonant characterization of Johannes Kreisler and his seminal review of Beethoven’s C minor Symphony would be exemplary. There can be heard in Balzac’s curtly reductive remarks a hint of desire, the desire to emulate Hoffmann, perhaps some day to equal his level of expertise. In brief, he wants to “talk music” like an insider, like

someone who is in the know, distinct from the outsider who can merely talk about music. Years later, Balzac strives to bypass Hoffmann altogether and vie directly with the paradigmatic composer: Again to Mme Hanska, the master of French Realism confesses that Beethoven is “the only man who ever made me feel jealous.”<sup>2</sup>

Within years of his intense engagement with the work of Hoffmann, in 1837, Balzac produces a pair of musical novellas—*Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni*—which clearly reflect his indebtedness to the German writer. In general, these narratives demonstrate how Balzac himself “talks music” in a way that to a large extent mirrors Hoffmann’s approach. However, without entering into an extended or detailed comparison of the two writers, it can be shown that Balzac’s particular treatment of musical material broaches issues and themes that move some distance away from his predecessor and, moreover, raise concerns over the act of “talking music” in a sense that may have even broader ramifications. To put it most abstractly, in concentrating on but one of the two works, namely on *Massimilla Doni*, my analysis strives to understand both how Balzac creates a literary place or location for music and what precisely this gesture of localization (or dislocation) implies for larger considerations of the relationship between verbal and musical language.

In this novella, set in Venice in 1820, Balzac formulates the problem of providing a space in literature for music by focusing on the problem of exchangeability. Venice is depicted as an emblem of dignity and poverty; the city itself is described as a beautiful work of art devoid of substantial value. In this regard, Balzac’s protagonist, the handsome but penniless prince, Emilio Memmi, is paradigmatic. The point is that the case of Venice demonstrates how the glory of artistic beauty can still flourish in financial destitution,

how aesthetic value is altogether distinct from monetary value. (Emilio at one point laments that he is prohibited by Austrian decree to sell off the artworks held in his palazzo, so as to get money for food.) If monetary value is grounded in exchangeability, then aesthetic value—so Balzac seems to suggest—is strictly non-exchangeable. Art is not a commodity. It must stay in place. Like the marbles in Emilio's ancestral home, art cannot be deployed upon the checkerboards or *saccaria* that the Venetian exchequers famously introduced to European banking.

However, that said, in working to find a place for music within literature, Balzac also seems to imply that the arts, however resistant to commodification, may in fact be exchangeable among themselves: for example, that music may be exchanged for literature, or that visual art may be exchanged for music, and so on. The urgent question, then, is: Can the principle of exchangeability within the system of the Sister Arts preserve art from the aesthetic devaluation of the marketplace; or does it not, rather, expose art to a process that ultimately corrupts a particular ideal of aesthetic freedom (that is, a freedom from values imposed from without)? In relocating music to literature, can the basis of art's autonomy be maintained; or does it come under threat? If artistic dislocation does in fact instigate the collapse of art's non-commodifiable purity—a charge frequently brought against artistic decadence, where effects of synaesthesia reign—would a demonstration of an artwork's resistance to relocation allow art to hold on to its dignity: a dignity indifferent to its marketable poverty?

Balzac's distinctly musical aspirations spanned his entire career as a writer. As early as 1820, when he was but twenty years old, struggling to prove to his family that he could

financially support himself as a writer, toiling away, as legend has it, in the solitude and obscurity of the garret rented in the Rue de Lesdiguières, Balzac dove into his first attempt at literature, not in the genre of epic poetry or tragedy, and certainly not in the form of a novel, but rather, less expectedly, in the form of an opéra comique.<sup>3</sup> The title was to be *Le Corsaire*, based on Byron's poem about the swashbuckling rebel, Conrad, and his free-roaming band of pirates. The stage of the Opéra Comique would be the testing ground for this young genius. Fame and compensation were on the horizon. However, work on the libretto was abandoned soon after the aspiring Romantic came to inevitable frustration: as he exclaimed to his sister Laure, "Where the devil am I going to find a composer?"<sup>4</sup>

Still, the fascination that opera exerted on this musician manqué, and the literary desire it engendered, would persist. In May 1837, Balzac, who had since found and put to good use his novelistic voice, reported to his friend Maurice Schlesinger of a particularly inspiring evening spent at the home of George Sand:

*Nous parlâmes musique*—we talked music; there were many of us: although I would be a musician like one used to be a shareholder of the Royal Lottery of France, when one would, say, procure a ticket for the price of a seat in the loge, I timidly expressed my ideas about *Mosè*. Ah! It will resound in my ears for a long time, that word of initiation: "You should write what you have just said!"<sup>5</sup>

No longer restricted to the outside, Balzac has gained entrance into the temple precincts of music. His relationship to music has progressed past the level of a mere theatergoer or amateur. Even though he concedes his outsider-status—a status easily remedied, however delusively, by an inexpensive monetary transaction—he nonetheless celebrates his

*initiation*, that is, his achievement of *going into* (*in-ire*) a place reserved for the privileged few. Having demonstrated his ability, like Hoffmann, to “talk music,” however timidly, he is no longer prohibited, but instead permitted at last to enjoy the mysteries of this sacred art.<sup>6</sup> The theme is Rossini’s 1818 oratorio, *Mosè in Egitto*, which continued to be performed regularly at Théâtre Italien since its Paris premiere in 1822, together with the French adaptation *Moïse et Pharaon*, prepared for the Théâtre de l’Opéra in 1827. Evidence that Balzac took full advantage of this encouragement is seen in the novella begun at the time, *Massimilla Doni*, which repeats, in the brief “Dedication” to Jacques Strunz, the metaphor of initiation, and which, more importantly, features an extended commentary on Rossini’s *Moses*, presumably one that more or less replicates the ad hoc interpretation offered at Sand’s party.<sup>7</sup>

Balzac’s commentary, as well as the novella that frames it, centers on the so-called Naples version of the oratorio, with libretto by Andrea Leone Totolla, who adapted it from Francesco Ringhieri’s 1760 tragedy entitled *L’Osiride*. The plot complicates the account from Exodus, where Moses pleads with Pharaoh for the release of his people, by inserting a love story between the Pharaoh’s son Osiride and a Hebrew princess named Elcia. The ensuing drama, coupled with Rossini’s setting, provides the essential elements for Balzac’s own novella and, moreover, serves as the occasion for the writer to talk music. Balzac’s intention to do what Hoffmann did so well has settled on its object, has lighted upon a suitable place for expression, a satisfying *location* of meaning. Rossini’s rendition of the Biblical story about oppression and liberation has freed the novelist’s voice from its inadequacies. It has revealed a glimpse of the Promised Land.

In *Massimilla Doni*, it is the title figure who presents the extended interpretation of Rossini's opera. As one of Balzac's "études philosophiques," the novella also offers some reflections on the qualitative differences between language, music, and the other fine arts. Massimilla explains:

[The language of music], a thousand times richer than the language of words, is to speech [*langage*] what thought is to its utterance [*parole*]; it arouses sensations and ideas in their very form, in that part of us where ideas and sensations are born, but leaves them as they are in each of us. That power over our inmost being is one of the grandest facts of music. All the other arts impose on the mind definite creations; those of music are infinite. We are compelled to accept the ideas of the poet, the painter's picture, the sculptor's statue; but each one of us interprets music at will according to his sorrow or his joy, his hope or his despair. While other arts encircle our thoughts by fixing them upon something determined, music lets them loose over all nature, which it alone has the power to express.<sup>8</sup>

These statements rehearse in many ways conventional, nineteenth-century views, views that were in fact seminally codified by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The series of antitheses—between music's immediacy and verbal mediation, between vagueness and determination, infinitude and definition, interiority and exteriority—can be found in most aesthetic assessments beholden to German Romanticism.<sup>9</sup> The innovation of Balzac's contribution, therefore, lies not in this regurgitation of ideas from across the Rhine, but rather in the way the novella tests and qualifies their ramifications. In providing a narrative, verbal space for the opposition between words and music, Balzac obliges the

reader to consider what happens to music when it occupies literature and, conversely, what occurs when literature gives shelter to music. What are the consequences for literature and for music when an opera takes place in a novella? This question seems to motivate Theodor Adorno's reflections on Balzac when he attests to a fundamental musicality at work within the realist project: "If music is the world dematerialized and reproduced in interior space, then the interior space of Balzac's novels, projected outward as a world, is the retranslation of music into the kaleidoscope."<sup>10</sup> To be sure, this kind of internalizing reproduction and subsequent "retranslation" depends in large measure on the writer's ability to "talk music" or, at the very least, his talent for letting music take place. Yet, what precisely does this capacity accomplish? What does it contribute to the grand social enterprise of the *Comédie humaine*? How might it enhance our understanding of, or possibly even our engagement with, society?

If someone talks music, then music, strictly speaking, does not speak, it does not sound out. Even in the case of *Massimilla Doni*, where a particular composition, Rossini's *Mosè*, is specifically conjured, the music's presence within a literary text is purchased with muteness, regardless of the reader's acoustic memory. If a musical creation is infinite and indefinable, as Massimilla claims, then its inclusion within the defined space of a literary work would appear to seal it off from being heard. This silencing is based on what I would like to call literature's *localizing* function. The desire to immure music within the confines of verbal description or interpretation manifests itself either as a sincere gesture to hold on to that which is elusive, keeping music in place, like a Proteus bound, so as to allow it to give forth a determinate meaning; or as a terribly cruel strategy



that robs music both of its liberating force and its freedom, leaving it to wither away behind walls of text. Elsewhere, in *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, where Balzac explicitly employs the metaphor of a “wall of paint,” there is a vanishing of visual art that is somewhat similar to the kind of silencing I am noting here. Still, a close reading of that text would show that *ekphrasis*—the verbal representation of a visual representation—does not simply entail a looking away, but rather includes an invitation to look again, that is, with eyes now informed by the verbal detour. In this sense, Balzac follows the didactic impulse that has accompanied ekphratic discourse from Philostratus on, an impulse that rests entirely on a decidedly iconological understanding of visual art. With music, however, the silencing appears to be more definitive and therefore more fatal, insofar as the verbalization strives to finalize a meaning, in an analogously iconological fashion, for an art that is presented as fundamentally aniconological. Once the threshold into declared meaning has been crossed, the music thus located is forever transformed into something representational. Visual art certainly differs from literature on the level of the medium, yet the two forms conventionally share a logic of representation that renders them homogeneous. Music, on the other hand, at least from the perspective of the Romantic theory that Massimilla pronounces in the passage cited above, is understood as non-representational. The consequence here is that any verbal reformulation should be taken as heterogeneous to the sound and movement of performed music.

Music, then, would seem to exist within literature only as that which has been lost to literature. Balzac, however, does not end with this ending. To talk music is not the same as to talk art in general. Sound, Balzac seems to emphasize, has the penetrating power to bleed through obstructions, to evade topologies, to emerge afresh even after it

has been localized. Like the voice from a soprano's mouth, like the tone from a violin's body, the curiously immaterial material of sound can detach from its source and readily flee from one place to another. Even though desire strives to locate the acoustic phenomenon of musical experience, sound can always find a way to dislocate itself. In a very specific sense, recognized by Ernst Bloch, the music that is sheltered within literature is essentially *utopian*.<sup>11</sup>

A number of dislocations, ascribable perhaps to something fundamentally acoustic, may be discerned regarding *Massimilla Doni*. To begin, unlike the majority of Balzac's fiction, this tale does not take place in France, but rather in the Italian city of Venice. As mentioned, Balzac began work on the novella in 1837, upon returning from a brief re- or dis-location of his own in northern Italy. (Apparently, he had been fleeing his Parisian creditors.)

This Italian resetting points to a more fundamental dislocation, one that does not concern the narrative's geographical but rather its temporal coordinates. Specifically, I am referring to the relation between what narratologists define as the *énoncé* and the *situation d'énonciation*. Here, it would be instructive to compare *Massimilla Doni* with *Gambara*, a second novella directly concerned with music, on which Balzac worked almost simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> Together with *Sarrasine* (1830) and *Le Cousin Pons* (1847, at one time provisionally entitled *Les deux musiciens*), the *Massimilla Doni-Gambara* pair comprise Balzac's most sustained reflections on music.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, *Gambara* constitutes a nearly perfect counterpart to *Massimilla Doni*, with each text presenting a different side to musical experience. A story about a mad and destitute opera composer—a close analogue to Frenhofer, the deranged painter of *Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu*—

*Gambara* deals with the creative invention of music, whereas *Massimilla Doni* deals with its performance. Balzac himself envisioned the two novellas as working together in a strictly complementary fashion: both to Maurice Schlesinger and to Mme Hanska, the author emphasizes this “double form,” whereby *Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni* treat the dual aspects of “composition” and “execution,” respectively.<sup>14</sup> However, this marked parallel is disrupted by each story’s relation to its enunciation. Unlike *Gambara*, which is set in 1831, close to the narrator’s present, the action of *Massimilla Doni* unfolds at a further point in the past, specifically in the year 1820, nearly two decades before the time of narration. Why would Balzac formulate his account of musical “execution” in a more distant time? Why would he disturb an otherwise clear complementarity between these two texts? The difference, I would argue, is not arbitrary. *Massimilla Doni* may be about the staging of music, but the sounds produced therein are fatefully consigned to the silence of a now remote world—a world deemed distant, not simply because of the time that has elapsed between the event and its recounting, but rather because of the *qualitative* differences between these two epochs. From the point of view of French history, the temporal stretch between the events of *Massimilla Doni* in 1820 and their recollection in 1837 is above all punctuated by the July Revolution of 1830.

Autobiographically, the distinction between these two eras is characterized by Balzac’s own shifting political allegiances, from the earlier liberalism of his associates in the journalism trade to the later monarchism and Catholicism of his mature aristocratic circles. The nearly twenty-year span further traces Balzac’s rise from a failed librettist in the Rue de Lesdiguières to a renowned novelist. The historical caesura of 1830—Balzac’s own breakthrough year—articulates, therefore, an important tension in

*Massimilla Doni* that is far less emphatic in *Gambara*, which falls on this side of the July Revolution. The literary treatment of musical production calls for a temporal division that reinforces the geographical separation between Italy and France—temporal and spatial locations that invite travel, either by coach or by memory.<sup>15</sup> The fact that Rossini himself resigned from writing operas upon the abdication of Charles X is not irrelevant. By locating the events of his “musical-execution” novella in 1820 Venice, Balzac significantly dislocates its action from a qualitatively different, French present. In this light, *Gambara* would amount to a re-location: decisively grounding the event of musical-composition in the subjectivity of the composer *qua* origin. The music of *Massimilla Doni*, however sheltered, enjoys no such anchoring.

The historical, geographical, and autobiographical caesurae of *Massimilla Doni* erect a series of barriers. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the narrative opens with a reflection on loss, specifically, on what has been left behind on the other side of the various divides. The tale focuses on two young lovers, Emilio Memmi and Massimilla Doni, both of whom belong to an Italian aristocracy that has lost its political autonomy, first to Napoleon and then to Austrian sovereignty. As in the case of Elcia, the Hebrew princess in Rossini’s *Mosè*, Emilio and Massimilla observe how their royal status has been severely compromised by the enslavement of their nation. Indeed, the island Republic of Venice, which flourished for a thousand years, whose navy was the envy of Europe and a bane to the East, has now turned into a menial outpost in service to Vienna, emasculated, demoralized, and decrepit. The lion of San Marco has retreated into humiliating hibernation.<sup>16</sup> The *ancien régime* of Venice has become stale, mere crumbs upon the banquet tables of foreign rulers. The nobility has taken on a spectral existence,

wandering through their city as pale presences of glory long absent, of greatness long dead. Balzac sets up his story with vivid references to this debased nobility, which is “entirely ruined” (MD 543/2). Here, in Venice, the aristocrats lack a political voice—*gli manca la voce*. Balzac reminds us how these descendants of illustrious dukes, these members of patrician families, have been subjugated and dispossessed; how these inheritors of a brilliant, unequalled past have been unspeakably degraded, some even to the level of gondolier or rag-picker (MD 543/2).

Although certainly suffering a degree of disenfranchisement, Emilio and Massimilla have not sunk as low as other Italians. Their situation is nowhere near as grave as the lot of rag-pickers. Nonetheless, they live, as Massimilla at one point complains, in a “land of slaves” (MD 574/33); they exist, despairingly, beneath the burden of heteronomy (MD 577 – 78/34 – 35). Emilio is even further incapacitated. His powerlessness is not limited to political, societal, or financial matters: in his exaggerated adoration of Massimilla, he has turned her into an ideal, placing her upon a pedestal so high and so spiritual that he is unable to consummate their love. Emilio is not only politically powerless, he is also sexually impotent, in love with a creature who is divine and therefore inaccessible. He is yet another victim of that typically Balzacian disease of sexual frustration, an illness that is generally debilitating and often self-destructive.

This is not the first relationship in which Massimilla has had to deal with an incapable companion. Her parents, clearly concerned with their daughter’s stability in an unstable world, married her to the older, wealthy Duke Cataneo, who may have secured ample property and revenue for the young lady, but who proves to be an unfit husband. Cataneo’s problem is not idealization, but rather melomania. He is obsessed with opera,

tirelessly lusting after those fleeting moments of emotional power which alone bring him ecstasy. Cataneo wanted a duchess but had not the energy for a wife. As is often the case, Balzac, the physiologist of marriage, has endowed his character with enlightened tolerance: Perfectly aware of his incapability, old Cataneo ungrudgingly suggested that his young bride find herself a “cavaliere servente” (MD 547/5), who might take his stead and incidentally, help him ensure the survival of his family line. Massimilla’s mother took her forthwith to all of Italy’s great opera houses, not in search of musical *jouissance* but rather in search of a *jouissance* far more mundane. At last, one evening at Venice’s Fenice, Massimilla discovered Emilio as he passed by her box. “The Venetian [sc. Emilio] felt struck by lightning; while a voice cried: *Here he is!* in the ears of the duchess.”<sup>17</sup>

The voice that intrudes upon Massimilla’s consciousness is incorporeal and compelling, not dissimilar to Socrates’ *daimonion* or Kant’s “voice of reason”—a voice that arrests, a voice that overtakes one’s subjective position. It is a voice, most importantly, that cannot be located. Emilio, too, is overmastered by a voice, the voice of his beloved, that is, a voice whose source may be identified but whose efficacy lies in its capacity to dislocate and confuse sources: “By what moral phenomenon did his soul so seize his body that he no longer felt in himself, but rather entirely in this woman at the least word she spoke in that voice, which disturbed [*troublait*] the very sources of life within him?”<sup>18</sup> These voices that lack assignation, that come from outside and lodge themselves deep within, cause a commotion that perpetuates a love that is as ideal as it is paralyzing. For the first three months, the pair limit their meetings to the public space of the opera house; and then, with the approach of summer, Emilio joins Massimilla in her

country retreat, where for the next six months their love remains entirely “intense” (*violent*) but perfectly “timid” (MD 548/6). Nine months pass without their desire coming to term.

A letter from Emilio’s closest friend, Marco Vendramini, arrives to make some announcements: first, that Facino Cane has passed away, leaving the title of Prince of Varese to Emilio; and second, that the famous soprano, Carla Tinti, is to perform in Venice at La Fenice. The first piece of the news is essentially worthless: the former Prince of Varese died alone and penniless in a Paris prison.<sup>19</sup> Emilio therefore simply relates the more important information to Massimilla. He explains how la Tinti had been a mere tavern servant, just twelve years old, when a Sicilian nobleman discovered her “miraculous voice” and decided to make her his protégée. Today, fully matured and meticulously trained, she has been captivating audiences across Italy. As Emilio speaks, Massimilla vainly resists recognizing la Tinti’s noble protector as her own estranged husband, the hideous Duke Cataneo.

Massimilla, who lost her husband to Carla Tinti’s voice, will soon lose her lover to Carla Tinti’s body. Unbeknownst to Emilio, the soprano and her entourage are now renting the rooms of his family’s palazzo in Venice. It had all been set up by Vendramini, another member of the fallen nobility, now addicted to opium, who thought the rent income would greatly ease the burden of Emilio’s financial distress. Unaware of this arrangement (which was probably related at the unread, latter half of the friend’s letter), Emilio enters his bedroom and undresses, believing that the apartments’ renovations and the luxuriant supper set out on the table were simply a surprise gift from Massimilla. But Emilio is about to learn that his place is no longer his. La Tinti soon arrives with Cataneo,

who discovers the young man in his protégée's bed and flees the scene in despair. La Tinti, who was compelled to waste her youth with an elderly and rather ugly duke, and Emilio, who is condemned to lead a monkish life at the feet of his ideal love, quickly succumb to the pleasures of the flesh. Henceforth, Emilio is trapped within the snares of Venus duplex, caught between a celestial love for Massimilla and a vulgar lust for la Tinti. His spiritual empowerment is purchased with sensual impotence, while his sexual prowess jeopardizes his soul.

It is in conjunction with this classic plot between the spirit and the senses, between pure love and debauchery, that Balzac introduces his reading of Rossini's *Moses* oratorio. In her box at the opera house, while Emilio sits in the shadows pale and sickly, Massimilla offers a detailed interpretation of the piece to a physician visiting from Paris. As mentioned, her lengthy exegesis is presumably very similar to the ideas Balzac himself presented to George Sand and company. Massimilla has begged the French doctor to cure Vendramini of his opium addiction and, above all, to rescue her Emilio, whose health has, to her mind, inexplicably suffered a recent, melancholic downturn. Her lecture on the oratorio's meaning is given as a kind of advance payment for the physician's services. Indeed, Massimilla's offer of aesthetic interpretation in exchange for the doctor's assistance already reveals her tendency to deal with art in terms of gross marketability.

That said, it would be misleading to suggest that Massimilla proceeds in a thoroughly base fashion. Her general aesthetic statements, as noted above, attempt to maintain an aesthetic of purity or non-exchangeability. For example, she insists on the impossibility of arriving at concepts of musical meaning. Although she respects medical



science for matters of health, she is doubtful whether the doctor's training would enable him to appreciate Rossini's genius. She gently derides France as "a nation occupied with philosophical theories, with analysis, with discussion, and always disturbed [*troubé*] by civil divisions."<sup>20</sup> For her, "modern music, which demands a profound peace, is the language of tender, loving souls, inclined to emotionally noble exaltation."<sup>21</sup> Ironically, in this, one of his *études philosophiques*, Balzac identifies the problem of the French reception of Italian opera as the tendency to identify problems. The Parisian novelist diagnoses Parisian insensibility as an incapacitating desire to diagnose everything. The typically French preoccupation with theoretical matters—a preoccupation that Massimilla connects with that nation's ceaseless divisiveness—essentially assigns a meaningful place for every aspect of experience. It nourishes itself on classifications, on locating significance. Consequently, according to the duchess, in terms that clearly allude to the famous *Querelle des Bouffons* a century before, the French are deaf to music because of their intellectual and political partisanship. The French listen with their minds, the Italians with their hearts. The French physician may be able to cure the lovesick Emilio and the strung-out Vendramini, he may be able to put them in their place, but is it possible for him to understand an art form that would appear to elude all placement?

Despite her suspicions concerning conceptualization, Massimilla does execute her own methods of localization, not only in her rash and reductive generalization of French audiences, but also in her interpretive commentary of the opera. Upon relating France's ruinous analytic spirit to its divisive politics, the Italian duchess nonetheless submits the musical piece to a political allegory. "Moses is the liberator of an enslaved race," she remarks. "Remember that thought, and you will see with what religious hope the whole

house of La Fenice will listen to the prayer of the delivered Hebrews, with what thunder of applause it will respond!”<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Massimilla posits a unified Italian audience, which is contrasted with the French citizenry, presumably split between liberalism and conservatism, between monarchists and republicans. Moreover, her understanding of national liberation differs significantly from the ideas of the Parisian doctor, as an earlier conversation revealed. For Massimilla’s dream is the return of the aristocratic republics of Italy’s glorious past; hardly the rise of the bourgeoisie, whose guillotines, in her opinion, not only severed the heads of the nobility but also killed the noble fostering of high art.<sup>23</sup> Still, all things considered, Massimilla’s revelation of a determinate, political message in Rossini’s work fixes what she herself has claimed to be utterly elusive and indefinable. By locating the power of the oratorio in a specific political, nationalist meaning, she offers us a way to understand the audience’s response as unified and unequivocal. In this way, Massimilla talks music and talks music well—but at what cost? Can any music be heard above her continuous commentary throughout the performance? Does not her interpretation of the opera as a story of liberation hypocritically enslave music to word, voice to meaning? We listen as Massimilla explicitly contradicts herself: Having described music in explicit contrast to poetry and the visual arts, she goes on to offer analogies derived from the tradition of the Sister Arts, referring to the opera in turn as a “poem,” an “elegy,” a “painting,” and an “edifice”—transforming the music, that is, into a transitive signifier, whose signified could just as well be expressed in words, colors, or stone. In a typical revulsion for the synesthetic confusion of the arts, the Parisian *médecin* eventually deplores Massimilla’s rates of exchange: “As an analyst, a

materialist, I must confess that I have always rebelled against the affectation of certain enthusiasts, who try to make us believe that music paints with tones” (MD 608).

Although Massimilla’s exegetical procedures strive to be definitive, it is still possible that there remains an unaccounted residue; that her hermeneutics cannot hermetically seal off the sound emanating from the stage. Her voiced opinion is but one kind of confinement, one that may not be, in the end, all that soundproof. Massimilla has a voice, but hers is, after all, just one voice among many in Balzac’s text. As the first violinist raises his bow, we read how Emilio flings himself into the dark corner of a back seat, uttering not a word.

The performance had been anticipated by the Venetians for some time, since la Tinti, in the role of Elcia, was to be joined this evening by the equally popular and astounding tenor, Genovese, in the role of Osiride, the Pharaoh’s son. Osiride, in love with Elcia, attempts to overturn the Pharaoh’s decision to release the Hebrews. In the second act, however, Osiride is struck down by lightning, and the enslaved race is free to cross the Red Sea. The performance proceeds beautifully, as Massimilla makes her compelling points that interpret the Hebrew people as the oppressed aristocracy, forced to abandon their religion by the Egyptian mob of unbelievers. Throughout, the duchess suggests an allusion to the French Reign of Terror. Between the opera house, La Fenice, a crucial locale for Venetian resistance against foreign rule, and Florian’s, the café that warmly welcomed the nationalists and discouraged an Austrian clientele, Massimilla’s reading would not fall on deaf ears. The theatergoers who cross the Campo S. Moise in order to go from one institution to the next would have much on which to reflect. All

aspects of the opera, from the libretto's verses to the harmonic progressions, thus fall, thanks to Massimilla, *into place*.

Suddenly, however, back on stage, the easy allegorical explanations are rudely interrupted as Genovese and la Tinti begin the climactic duet of the First Act: "*Non è ver che stringa il cielo*—It is not true that heaven ties / the bonds between two hearts / if our love always cost the soul grief and pain." The problem is that Genovese's voice is failing miserably. He squeals and shrieks in the most dreadful manner. His performance is utterly unbearable and therefore altogether disruptive. Massimilla halts her explication. The audience is flabbergasted; the orchestra uneasy. Emilio for the first time speaks up, shouting from the back of the loge in dismay: "Genovese brame comme un cerf"—"Genovese is bellowing like a stag!" (MD 596/53). Whatever is happening, Genovese effectively interrupts Massimilla's desire to validate the opera's meaning; his botched singing dislocates. As though responding to her politicized interpretation, Genovese seems to be shouting, "It is not true!"—"non è ver!"

Genovese, who just the night before sang impeccably in la Tinti's absence, is now embarrassing himself before all of Venice. The beastly sounds emitted from his throat block Massimilla's interpretation, which will continue only after the tenor leaves the stage. Genovese the singer is no longer a sign; he has become opaque, no longer a pure, unobtrusive vehicle for conveying significance. Yet, Genovese's horrifying performance not only disturbs the political reading, it also angers those members of the audience who in fact care little for the libretto and instead sit in their seats enthralled by the sheer beauty of the melodies and harmonies. Balzac gives us Capraja, another Italian melomaniac who often engages in lofty, quasi-mystical discussions with Cataneo on the

power of music. In an earlier episode Capraja explains precisely what he seeks when he attends the opera, namely the perfect execution of a *roulade*, the rolling melismatic display of the virtuoso that blurs rather than channels verbal significance. In this earlier scene, Capraja relates how eager he is to hear Genovese in the upcoming performance of Rossini's *Mosè*:

[Genovese is] the first singer who has satisfied me. I shall not die without hearing a *roulade* executed like the ones I have often heard in certain dreams, in which upon waking I seemed to see the sounds float in the air. The *roulade* is the highest expression of art.<sup>24</sup>

Capraja's desire hardly focuses on what the voice signifies, but rather concentrates on the voice itself in its pure, pre-signifying effulgence. How utterly shattering and disappointing, then, when Genovese commits vocal atrocities like a shameless imbecile?

Genovese's disruptive, dislocating fiasco—his vocal impotence, which is clearly analogous to Emilio's sexual disorder—is a double failure of the voice, both a failure to communicate the import of the libretto and a failure to generate the beauty of the melody. Genovese lacks a voice because he is unable either to produce meaning or to provide an object for affective enthrallment. His performance disturbs both the semantic and the aesthetic functions of the voice; it is neither an instrument nor a fetish. In the first case, his bellowing breaks the mimetic illusion: the Egyptian Osiride is obfuscated by the bumbling Italian. In the second case, his artistic catastrophe affords no pleasure; it frustrates the listeners' chances to experience any *jouissance*. We could say, his voice

disarticulates; it cannot be incorporated into the matrix of Massimilla's political allegory and it ruins Capraja's fondest dreams.

Nonetheless, Genovese's inarticulateness does articulate something. As the performance progresses it becomes clear that the tenor has not entirely forgotten his training or his art. In the second act, in the duet with Carthagenova, who is playing the role of Pharaoh, Genovese sings admirably and more than satisfies everyone's expectations. Moreover, later that evening, walking across the Piazzetta, Genovese proves to his small audience that he is still quite capable of performing brilliantly. There, beneath the moonlight, unaccompanied, he sings Crescentini's famous aria, "Ombra adorata," and powerfully brings those nearby to tears. "Never did music more truly merit the epithet divine."<sup>25</sup> Capraja, who is among those present, steps forward to give an explanation for Genovese's inconsistency—an explanation that roughly rehearses Diderot's well-known "paradox":

When an artist is so unfortunate as to be full of the passion he wishes to express, he cannot depict it because he is the thing itself instead of its image. Art is the work of the brain, not the heart. When you are possessed by a subject you are a slave, not a master; you are like a king besieged by his people. Too keen a feeling, at the moment when you want to represent that feeling, causes an insurrection of the senses against the governing faculty.<sup>26</sup>

According to Capraja, the cause of Genovese's fiasco is obvious: he is madly in love with Carla Tinti, a love that can further connect the tenor's disability with Emilio's impotence, as well as link the soprano's effect with Massimilla's. Altogether, the two couples form a dynamic quartet of desire and frustration, of intention and failed consummation.

Genovese therefore articulates his infatuation by disarticulating the voice's other functions in Balzac's text, the semantic and the fetishistic. Whenever he had to sing directly to or before his beloved, Genovese's voice failed him. Considering Capraja's diagnosis, this failure could be specified in at least three ways, all of which have to do with exchanging the music's location. To begin, one could say that his performance suffered when he located the music in his own subjective desire, when he wanted to express his own personal intention. Alternatively, one could agree more closely with Capraja (along with Diderot) and affirm that the passion to be voiced in song came to be collocated with that voice, eradicating the distance or gap necessary for effective expression, since expressive efficacy seems to require that the voice conveying passion is not confused with the passion itself. Finally, a third interpretation would reveal Balzac's debt to Hoffmann, to Hoffmann's manner of talking music, specifically in his story *Das Sanctus*, which links the singer Zulema's loss of voice to her desire to express the inexpressible, to seek the absolute.<sup>27</sup> Like Frenhofer of *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* or the mad composer Gambara, Genovese demonstrates with his impassioned performance that the impossible wish to render in art the highest truth culminates in the destruction of art itself.

If Genovese the singer did not identify with the song, if he did not locate the melody and text in his own subjective desire or relocate it to some inaccessible, transcendent place, his singing would have continued to serve as viable locations for Massimilla's political interpretation and Capraja's affective engagement. On stage, in the role of Osiride, Genovese shouts "non è ver!" in a screech that shatters the voice's relation to truth, be it Massimilla's allegorical truth or Capraja's emotional truth. In the

Piazzetta scene, Genovese seems to allow Capraja and the others to satisfy their desire to locate the music; however, even here, Balzac's text alludes to an absence that frustrates any certainty. Genovese, we recall, performs the "Ombra adorata," an aria composed and famously executed by the castrato Crescentini. Here, as Roland Barthes memorably argues in his reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, the text evokes the idea of castration in order to cut language off from its reference.<sup>28</sup> Is Balzac's slight allusion to a castrato in *Massimilla Doni* accomplishing the same semiotic effect? To be sure, Genovese's performance reveals that every utterance is severed from the subjective voice that would ground it. Like *la Zambinella*, he produces a voice that cannot be located, a voice whose loud and impossible beauty barely conceals a loss, an absence, a lack.

Balzac's discourse essentially plots different functions along the evanescent axis of time. On the one hand, it is a Realist gesture that undermines any transcendent topology, any vertical ascension to a fixed place of significance. On the other hand, it is an eminently musical method, which ultimately dissolves the very referential sites of meaning that presumably validate Realist prose. In other words, Balzac talks music by attending to a series of voices lost to other voices; he presents us with a sequence of voices, each one entering in turn, where the latter is heard at the expense of the former, where the presence of one marks the absence of another. Tellingly, the highpoint of the opera is judged to be the grand quartet of the second act, *Mi manca la voce*—"My voice fails me," "I lack a voice." Balzac's characters take turns in the loge to voice their individual reactions to this song: a quartet of audience responses to a quartet of staged melody.<sup>29</sup> Massimilla regards the piece as expressing the timeless value of aristocratic nobility and therefore introduces it as "one of those masterpieces that will withstand



Hamilton: *Mi manca la voce*

everything, even time.”<sup>30</sup> Capraja, in turn, applauds la Tinti’s performance by exclaiming: “She pours floods of purple into my soul!”<sup>31</sup> An anonymous gondolier enthusiastically blesses the young soprano.<sup>32</sup> And as Genovese continues to debase himself, plummeting to the level of the worst of chorus singers,<sup>33</sup> Emilio, his counterpart in powerlessness, remains utterly silent.

Rossini’s song has the old form of a canon in unison, four voices entering consecutively with the same melody and ultimately merging into a collective that, here, sings in the first-person singular:

Mi manca la voce!

Mi sento morire!

Si fiero martire

Che può tollerar?

My voice fails me!

I feel I shall die!

Such cruel torture

Who can bear it?

This piece, in Massimilla’s judgment, equals the entirety of Beethoven’s C minor Symphony, the entirety of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—two works that figure large in Hoffmann’s *Kreiserliana* series. Massimila further compares it to masterpieces by Marcello, Cimarosa, and Pergolesi: “Mi manca la voce” will serve as the guarantor of Rossini’s immortality. Over unobtrusive, graceful arpeggios, the melody passes through

the simplest of harmonic progressions, gently floating from tonic to dominant and back. It is a curious conflation of infancy and maturity—a lullaby of pain, an innocent’s lament. Elcia enters first, bewailing her decision to renounce her love. Osiride follows, regretting his resolve to abandon his nation. Amaltea and Aronne take up the melody in turn. In the end, the quartet communicates nothing other than the destruction of communication, a manifestation of ongoing disarticulation. Each singer expresses the incapacity to express. Balzac successfully talks music by allowing his voice, presented as Massimilla’s political allegory, to be undermined by—to yield its place to—other voices. He allows his voice to fail. (Georg Lukács, following the judgment of Friedrich Engels, well recognized this feature of Balzac’s project, which is said to describe with accuracy real social conditions, despites the author’s own voiced sympathies and allegiances.)<sup>34</sup> To hear the voice is to hear it go missing, to listen as the voice becomes a revenant that haunts and thereby disorients every locale, as in the spectral glory of Venice or the dream-like evanescence of the *roulade* or the hope of requited love.

In *Gambara*, Balzac suggests that music, which combines conceptual and aesthetic approaches, is an ideal means for the “search for the Absolute”—“Music is simultaneously [*tout à la fois*] a science and an art.”<sup>35</sup> Along these lines, Balzac reveals to Madame Hanska his high aspirations:

In five years, *Massimilla Doni* will be understood as a fine explanation of the most intimate procedures of art. In the eyes of its first readers, it will be what it appears to be, a lover who is unable to possess the woman whom he adores because he desires her too much and who possesses a wretched girl. Let us

therefore conclude from this that we are dealing with the birth [*l'enfantement*] of works of art!<sup>36</sup>

The *enfantement* of fresh beginnings also marks an event of voicelessness, of lacking a voice (*infans*). At the novella's end, the *enfantement* occurs. It occurs, however, in terms of represented life and not represented art. Emilio Memmi consummates his love with Massimilla: she learns that she is pregnant. The Absolute—the simultaneous conjunction of the transcendent and immanent realms, the identification of celestial and corporeal Venus—has been reached, not in music, but rather in its absorption into literature. The desired goal has been attained; impotence has been cured; but only after the music is over, only after sound has been definitively exchanged for written prose, only after the opera has *taken place*. The exchange of music for words, the way Balzac talks music in this text, preserves the aesthetic value of art, not by revealing art as something that can last but rather as something that must be lost: enjoying a dignity, like Venice's, grounded in its substantial poverty.

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#### NOTES

1. “J’ai lu Hoffmann en entier, il est au-dessous de sa réputation, il y a quelque chose, mais pas grand-chose; il parle bien musique” (November 2, 1833). Honoré de Balzac, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, edited by R. Pierrot, 4 vols. (Paris: Laffront, 1990), 1 : 84. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

2. Balzac, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, 1: 419.

3. Graham Robb affirms that the opera plot was indeed Balzac's first purely literary undertaking, after postponing his “philosophical investigations.” *Balzac: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1994), 58.

4. Honoré de Balzac, *Correspondance*, 5 vols., ed. R. Pierrot (Paris: Garnier, 1960 – 69), 1: 36.

5. “Nous parlâmes musique, nous étions plusieurs: quoique je fusse musicien comme on était autrefois actionnaire de la lotterie royale de France, quand on y prenait un billet, c’est-à-dire pour le prix d’un coupon de loge, j’exprimai timidement mes idées sur *Mosè*. Ah! il retentira longtemps dans mes oreilles, ce mot d’initiation: ‘Vous devriez écrire ce que vous venez de dire!’ ” (May 29, 1837); cited in Pierre Brunel, “*Mosè* dans *Massimilla Doni*,” *L’année balzacienne* 15 (1994): 39–54.

6. In his *Vie de Rossini*, Stendhal employs the same turn of phrase (“parler musique”) to introduce his brief chapter on *Mosè in Egitto*: “Notre âme était admirablement disposée à *parler musique* et à reproduire ses miracles.” *Vie de Rossini*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 339.

7. Balzac first published this analysis separately in the journal *La France musicale* on August 25, 1839.

8. “Cette langue [sc. de la musique], mille fois plus riche que celle des mots, est au langage ce que la pensée est à la parole; elle réveille les sensations et les idées sous leur forme même, là où chez nous naissent les idées et les sensations, mais en les laissant ce qu’elles sont chez chacun. Cette puissance sur notre intérieur est une des grandeurs de la musique. Les autres arts imposent à l’esprit des créations définies, la musique est infinie dans les siennes. Nous sommes obligés d’accepter les idées du poète, le tableau du peintre, la statue du sculpteur; mais chacun de nous interprète la musique au gré de sa douleur ou de sa joie, de ses espérances ou de son désespoir. Là où les autres arts cerclent nos pensées en les fixant sur une chose déterminée, la musique les déchaîne sur la nature

entière au'elle a le pouvoir de nous exprimer.” Honoré de Balzac. “Massimilla Doni,” ed. René Guise, in *Études philosophiques*, vol. 10 of *La Comédie humaine*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 587–88; English: *Massimilla Doni*, trans. Clara Bell and James Waring (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 2004), 45–46. Subsequent citations are to these editions and will be marked in the text by MD with page numbers.

Throughout, the English translation has been slightly modified.

9. For Balzac’s familiarity with this aesthetic program, see the many citations gathered by Marc Eigeldinger in *La Philosophie de l’Art chez Balzac* (Geneva: Cailler, 1957), 79–95.

10. Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry W. NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press), 124.

11. I am referring, of course, to Bloch’s *Geist der Utopie* (Second Edition, 1923), whose central section consists in a “Philosophie der Musik.” English: *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34–164.

12. For an analysis of *Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni*, together with *Sarrasine*, see Béatrice Didier, “Le Temps de la musique: Trois nouvelles de Balzac,” *L’année balzacienne* 8 (2007): 49–58. See also, Klaus Ley’s extensive readings in *Die Oper im Roman: Erzählkunst und Musik bei Stendhal, Balzac und Flaubert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> For a general overview of Balzac’s relation to music and musicians, see D. C. Parker, “Balzac, the Musician,” *Musical Quarterly* 5 (1919), 160 – 68.

14. To Maurice Schlesinger (undated), in *Correspondance*, 3: 285–87; to Mme Hanska (May 24, 1837), *Lettres à Mme Hanska*, 1.505–06.

15. A similar temporal and geographical dislocation is evident in Balzac's "Vendetta," written in the key year of 1830 and evoking the long lost France of 1814. I am grateful to Andrew Clark for pointing this out.

16. John Ruskin, writing in 1849, famously evokes Venice's "perfection of beauty ... still left for our beholding in the final period of decline: a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak—so quiet,—so bereft of all but her loveliness, that we might well doubt, as we watched her faint reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was the City, and which the Shadow." *The Stones of Venice*, ed. Jan Morris (London: Folio Society, 2001), 3–4.

17. "Le Vénitien [sc. Emilio] se sentit comme foudroyé; tandis qu'une voix cria: *le voilà !* dans les oreilles de la duchesse" (MD 547/5).

18. "Par quel phénomène moral l'âme s'emparait-elle si bien de son corps qu'il ne se sentait plus en lui-même, mais tout en cette femme à la moindre parole qu'elle disait d'une voix qui troublait en lui les sources de la vie?" (MD 547/4).

19. Balzac published the tale of *Facino Cane* in 1836. It opens with a strong evocation of the writer's garret in the Rue de Lesdiguières. *Etudes de mœurs: Scènes de la vie parisienne*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex et al., vol. 6, *La Comédie humaine*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

20. "peuple occupé de théories philosophiques, d'analyse, de discussions, et toujours troublé par des divisions intestines" (MD 587/45).

21. "La musique moderne, qui veut une paix profonde, est la langue des âmes tendres, amoureuses, enclines à une noble exaltation intérieure" (587/45).

22. “Moïse est le libérateur d’un peuple esclave! ...souvenez-vous de cette pensée, et vous verrez avec quel religieux espoir la Fenice tout entière écoutera la prière des Hébreux délivrés, et par quel tonnerre d’applaudissements elle y répondra!” (MD 588/46).

23. See Matthias Brozka, “Mosè und Massimilla: Rossinis *Mosè in Egitto* und Balzacs politische Deutung” in *Oper als Text: Romantische Beiträge zur Libretto-Forschung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1986), 125–145.

24. “...le premier chanteur qui m’ait satisfait. Je ne mourrai donc pas sans avoir entendu des roulades exécutées comme j’en ai souvent écouté dans certains songes au réveil desquels il me semblait voir voltiger les sons dans les airs. La roulade est la plus haute expression de l’art” (MD 581/39).

25. “Jamais la musique ne mérita mieux son épithète de divine.” (MD 612/68).

26. “Quand un artiste a le malheur d’être plein de la passion qu’il veut exprimer, il ne saurait la peindre, car il est la chose même au lieu d’en être l’image. L’art procède du cerveau et non du cœur. Quand votre sujet vous domine, vous en êtes l’esclave et non le maître. Vous êtes comme un roi assiégé par son peuple. Sentir trop vivement au moment où il s’agit d’exécuter, c’est l’insurrection des sens contre la faculté!” (MD 613).

27. See Ley, *Die Oper im Roman*, 189–195.

28. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970); English: *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

29. The theatrical potential of Balzac’s narrative was entertained by Oskar Schoeckh, who composed an opera, *Massimilla Doni*, in 1935.

30. “Ce *Mi manca la voce* est un de ces chefs-d’œuvre qui résisteront à tout, même au temps.” (MD 603/60).
31. “Elle me verse des flots de pourpre dans l’âme” (MD 604/61).
32. “Que le ciel épuise ses grâces sur ta tête!” (MD 604/61).
33. “il devenait le plus mauvais de tous les choristes” (MD 604/60).
34. See Georg Lukács, *German Realists in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), xxv–xxvi.
35. The novella *Gambara* is found in the same volume of the Pléiade edition cited above (ed. R. Guise, vol. 10), 478.
36. “Dans cinq ans, *Massimilla Doni* sera comprise comme une belle explication des plus intimes procédés de l’art. Aux yeux des lecteurs du 1<sup>er</sup> jour, ce sera ce que ça est en apparence, un amoureux qui ne peut posséder la femme qu’il adore parce qu’il la desire trop et qui possède une misérable fille. Faites-les donc conclure de là à l’enfantement des oeuvres d’art!” (January 22, 1838). Balzac, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, 1: 580.